

Extending Tribal Broadband Priority Act of 2021

Senator Elizabeth Warren (D–Mass.)

The problem

During the pandemic it has become clearer that access to high-speed internet is fundamental to accessing education, healthcare, jobs, and democracy, but the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has continuously created unnecessary barriers for tribal nations and Native Hawaiian organizations to access spectrum rights over their lands despite the hardship tribal communities have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The solution

The Extending Broadband Tribal Priority Act of 2021 will require the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to open a new 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window no later than 30 days after the bill is enacted. This bill will give tribal nations and Native Hawaiian organizations an adequate amount of time to apply for spectrum licenses over their own lands.

Background

Even when the Window was still open, the FCC received numerous requests to extend the 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window for application by no less than 180 days from the original deadline of August 3, 2020.

The FCC refused to implement an extension, instead adding a severely limited 30-day application period that expired on September 2, 2020.

Today, the United States scores above the world average for connection rates to fixed broadband services for Americans living off tribal lands at 92 percent, but only 65 percent of Americans living on tribal lands have access to these wireless services. This leaves approximately 1.5 million people on reservations without access to basic wireless services. Because tribal nations and Native Hawaiian organizations cannot access spectrum rights to deploy broadband and telephone networks over their tribal lands, in some of the most geographically isolated areas in the country, Native Americans continue to suffer from lack of access to life-saving digital services, and broadband access that we take for granted.

The Extending Tribal Broadband Priority Act of 2021 specifically:

- Establishes a new 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window
- Requires that the FCC open this new window no later than 30 days after the bill is enacted
- Creates additional time for tribal nations and Native Hawaiian organizations to apply for unassigned spectrum licenses over Tribal lands to deploy internet services